

7/12/04

Don Johnson

From: Trey Shupert
Sent: Friday, July 09, 2004 1:13 AM
To: Board of Selectmen; Don Johnson
Subject: Attached - Morrison Master Plan Recommendation

Folks:

I had an action item to forward to the Board, recommendations for the formation of a Morrison Farm Master Planning Committee. I have attached a document that was developed by Bob Johnson, Tom Tidman and myself. It is submitted for your review and consideration for Monday's meeting.

I have included in the document historical background, reasons for a Master Plan committee, suggested draft Selectmen goals for Morrison Farm Master Plan, planning process and a recommended list of potential members for the Master Planning Committee. Please note that membership maybe an issue as there appear to be a number of interested citizens. We tried to keep the committee small (following previous effective practice) while ensuring that all the various interest groups would be adequately represented. As such, committee membership is anticipated at 10 people in order to keep the group manageable, yet representative of the various interests.

To be sure, there is a small minority of citizens who will be present at our meeting to advocate for a much larger planning group and/or advocate for their specific organization (I think they call themselves "Friends of Morrison Farm") to be represented on the organization. My concern is that some members of this group have previously stated - publicly - that Morrison Farm does not need a master plan and that it must be preserved as is, intact. Several citizens opposed the CPC funding for a land use consultant for the planning effort and are now advocating that they can save the Town money by not using a consultant or by limiting the consultant's time by utilizing a different process developed by members of the Friends of Morrison Farm. Further, members of this organization have previously said that the 1997 Town Meeting vote to purchase the property for municipal use primarily for playing fields, was wrong and that the 1997 vote should be disregarded and the property preserved as conservation and open space. This group certainly has a specific agenda and they will of course have an opportunity to express their views in public session. However, the group should not be given preference over other groups, boards, committees or individual citizens.

I do have a concern with the group naming itself "Friends of Morrison Farm". To the best of my knowledge, using a name such as that has the connotation that it is a Town sanctioned entity similar to the Friends of the Acton Arboretum, or other such duly authorized Friends organization. The group's name is misleading and could give others the impression that the group has some special standing within the community and/or special status as a de facto town committee. If the Selectmen want to appoint such a committee, I have no issue with that. To the contrary, I do think that a Friends organization, appointed by the BoS and supported by Town Staff similar to the Friends of the Acton Arboretum could be a useful group. I just think that it should be the BoS creating such a committee and making member appointments. If the current group is unwilling to submit to Town rules, policies, appointment and oversight by the BoS, then I would suggest asking the group to change it's name, file for 501c3 status and publish a charter and bylaws.

That aside, I do want the board to understand that I have tried to incorporate some of this group's specific ideas for Morrison in the Selectmen recommendations. For example, members of the group have lobbied for preservation of the lower meadow areas of the property. Although there has never been any plan for development of the lower meadows, I have included that as one of the Selectmen goals. Another suggestion was to provide community garden space and this has been included as a Selectmen goal.

I remain confident that we can accommodate many of the suggestions from citizens and develop the property appropriately to create additional play space and preserving the more sensitive areas of the property. As we have done in the past with every planning effort, there will be ample opportunity for citizen input into the plan.

Regards,
 Trey

7/9/2004

Acton Board of Selectmen

Morrison Farm Master Plan

Background:

The Morrison Farm property on Concord Road was listed as the highest priority for Town acquisition in both the Town's Master Plan and the Open Space and Recreation Plan. In late 1996, the property became available for purchase by the Town through its 61A "first right of refusal" option. At the 1997 Annual Town Meeting (and capital override ballot vote), Acton voters appropriated \$1.3 million to purchase the 32.56 acre Morrison Farm. In addition to purchasing the property, Town Meeting also zoned the Morrison Farm land parcel for "General Municipal", which could include a variety of municipal uses.

A planning effort preceded the 1997 Annual Town Meeting to determine what types of uses could be feasible on the Morrison property. A conceptual use plan was prepared and showed that the property could support at least 2 playing fields in the upper meadow area immediately behind the barn, and that it could support necessary parking on the site. During Town Meeting, proponents for the purchase of the Morrison property noted that due to the unique features of the parcel, the property could support a variety of uses, especially recreational activities. In addition, the East Acton Village Plan (January, 2004) urged that playgrounds be considered as an additional use for the property.

Although the property was purchased in 1997, Mrs. Morrison retained the right, through a life estate, to continue to live in the farmhouse. In 2003, Mrs. Morrison vacated the farmhouse and it then came under the control of the Board of Selectmen. Since that time, citizens have begun to use the property for walking, hiking, horse riding, bird watching and plant and wildlife observation. A number of citizens have come forward advocating for the construction of badly needed playing fields, while other citizens have advocated for complete preservation of the property.

Rather than initiate a process to appropriate funds to develop some of the property, the Board of Selectmen has decided to appoint an advisory committee of representatives of various constituencies interested in the future uses and/or preservation of the Morrison Farm property.

This advisory committee will have the principal mission to develop a Master Plan for Morrison Farm according to the intent of the purchase of the property at the 1997 Annual Town Meeting and according to the following goals set forth by the Board of Selectmen:

Selectmen Goals for Morrison Farm:

1. Provide for active recreation/play space (1 or 2 soccer/play fields, preferably in the upper field area behind the barn).
2. Maintain the existing system of walking trails and construct a trail connection to the future Bruce Freeman Rail Trail and to East Acton Village.
3. Preserve the lower meadows, areas bordering Ice House Pond, woodland areas and other environmentally sensitive areas on the Morrison property.
4. Preserve the characteristics of the Morrison Farm and the views looking at the property from Concord Road.
5. Provide space for equestrian activities such as trail riding.
6. Provide for Community Garden space.
7. Provide space for a playground.
8. Determine the future use of the farmhouse, barn and any other out buildings.
9. Prioritize any development plans and include cost estimates and general construction timelines.

The Board of Selectmen has been granted CPA funds for the purposes of engaging a Land Use consultant to assist the Morrison Farm Master Plan advisory committee, Town Staff and the Board of Selectmen to develop the Morrison Farm Master Plan.

The specific mission of the Morrison Farm Master Planning Committee is to:

1. Prepare an RFP and select a Land Use Consultant to assist in the preparation of a Master Plan.
2. Review all available information and data available about the Morrison parcel and update the information as appropriate for reference during the development of the Master Plan.

3. Prepare a comprehensive Morrison Farm Master Plan that is:
 - a. Consistent with the vote of the 1997 Annual Town Meeting;
 - b. Achieves the goals of the Acton Board of Selectmen, to the extent feasible;
 - c. Leverages the unique features of the property for the benefit of future generations.

The Morrison Farm Master Planning Committee will consist of 10 representatives of the following Boards, Commissions, and citizen interest groups:

- 2 Selectmen (co-chairs of the committee)
- 1 Recreation Commission member
- 1 Youth/Adult Recreation league(s) representative
- 1 Cemetery Commission member
- 1 Conservation Commission member
- 1 Acton Conservation Trust member
- 1 East Acton Village Committee member
- 1 Abutter
- 1 At-large representative

The Committee will meet on a regular basis and meetings will be open to the public. As such, any interested citizen may attend committee meetings. The Committee will keep minutes of the meetings and once approved by the committee, these minutes will be forwarded to the Town Clerk for filing and public inspection. The Committee will have primary staff support from Tom Tidman, Director of Natural Resources for the Town of Acton. Additional staff support will be provided, if necessary, under the direction of the Town Manager.

As with previous planning efforts, it is anticipated that the Committee will seek out broad citizen input and recommendations through public forums, site tours and newspaper articles. Additionally, the committee co-chairs will update Board members (and the public) about the committee's progress, at Selectmen meetings.

It is anticipated that the Master Plan can be completed within ten (10) to twelve (12) months and upon its completion, the plan will be submitted to the Acton Board of Selectmen for adoption.

It is emphasized that implementation of any of the recommendations of the Morrison Farm Master Plan must be prioritized with other municipal needs, priorities and available financial resources.